

# Introduction To The Geneva Bible

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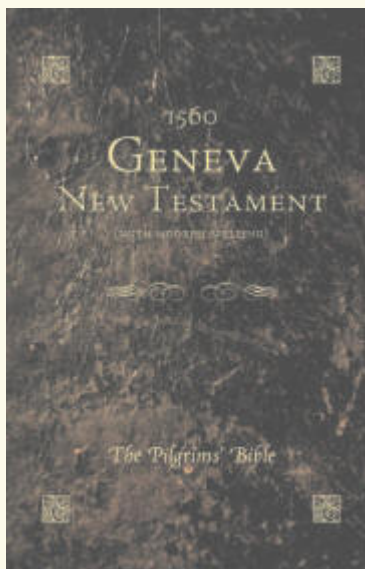
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## The 1560 GENEVA NEW TESTAMENT

Also known as

### The Pilgrims' Bible

(With modern spelling)



Despite being virtually unknown today, the Geneva Bible is most revolutionary of all English Bibles. It was born out of persecution and takes its name from the initial city of publication. When Mary I, also known as "Bloody Mary," took the throne in 1553, English Bibles were made illegal and heavy persecution broke-out against Protestants and proponents of English Scripture. Hundreds fled England and many of these exiles settled in Geneva, Switzerland, where they produced a new English Bible—the Geneva Bible.

The Geneva Bible was the first English version to be translated entirely from the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Though the text is principally just a revision of William Tyndale's earlier work of 1534, Tyndale only translated the New Testament and the Old Testament through 2 Chronicles before he was imprisoned. The English refugees living in Geneva completed the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to English for the first time. The work was led by William Whittingham.

When the Geneva translation of the New Testament appeared in 1557 and the entire Bible in 1560, it was innovative in both text and format, and quickly became the household Bible of English speaking people. It was the first English Bible to have modern verse divisions as well as modern chapter divisions. It was the first Bible to use italics to indicate words not in the original language and the first Bible to change the values of ancient coins into English pound sterling equivalents. It was also the first to use plain Roman type, which was more readable than the old Gothic type, and it was in a handy quarto size for easy use. With prologues before each book, extensive marginal notes, and a brief concordance, the Geneva Bible was in fact the first English "study Bible."

Between its first edition of 1560 and its last edition in 1644, 160 editions, totaling around a half million Bibles, were produced. And for the first time common people could not only understand the words in the Bible, they could actually own one. Its widespread use first solidified the English language among the common people, not the 1611 King James Bible as many assume.

Actually, the King James Bible required decades to surpass the popularity of the Geneva and supplant it from the hearts of the English speaking world.

In fact, the Geneva Bible was the principal English Bible initially brought to American soil, making it the Bible that shaped early American life and impacted Colonial culture more than any other.

## History of the English Bible

Through the Dark and early Middle Ages the English Bible was not necessarily forbidden; it just did not exist. Though portions of the Bible had been translated into English in earlier centuries, it was a fourteenth century Oxford scholar, John Wyclif, who arranged for, and likely assisted in the first complete English translation of the Bible. No printing press existed, therefore these Wyclif Bibles were handcopied, requiring months to reproduce just one Bible. Unfortunately, because knowledge of the original biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek was scarce in England at the time, they had to be translated from Latin.

Shortly after John Wyclif's death in 1384, the reaction against these first English Bibles and followers of Wyclif, called Lollards, became intense. The Lollards, like Wyclif, were deemed heretics, and the handcopied English Bibles, as well as Wyclif's writings, were declared heretical, confiscated, and destroyed. In 1401 King Henry IV enacted a statute called the "De Heretico Comburendo," which officially forbid English scripture and made "heresy" a secular crime—punishable by being burned at the stake. Despite persecution, the Lollards continued to teach and distribute English scripture. Pope Martin V became so outraged at the persistence of Wyclif's followers that he ordered Wyclif's bones to be dug up and burned forty-two years after Wyclif's death.

In the century following Wyclif's death, two important historical events occurred that further affected the spread of English scripture. The first was the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, which dispersed Greek refugees and their Greek biblical texts across Western Europe. This, along with the influence of Italian Humanism, returned the knowledge of Greek language to Western Europe after being absent for nearly one thousand years. The second occurred in Mainz, Germany, between 1453 and 1455 when Johann Gutenberg developed a printing press with movable type. Gutenberg's printing press, considered the greatest invention of the last millenia, forever changed Western Culture and initiated the mass production of Bibles.

Erasmus of Rotterdam, influenced by these two historical events, published the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516 and then four other editions in 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535.

A courageous and brilliant German monk named Martin Luther utilized Erasmus's second edition of 1519 to produce the first printed German New Testament from the original Greek, in September of 1522. It was not Luther's "95 Theses" nailed to the castle church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, that secured the Reformation on the continent but rather his German translation of the Bible, which put scripture in the hands of the people.

While Luther's German translation of Erasmus's Greek text forever changed the continent, William Tyndale's first printed English New Testament in 1526 forever changed the English world. In Tyndale's day English scripture was forbidden, so he published his New Testament while in exile in Germany.

Tyndale also used Erasmus's Greek text (third edition) to produce the first printed English New Testament. He later revised his New Testament and it was printed in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1534. Despite living as a hunted criminal, Tyndale's work was exceptional and so accurate that the later widespread Geneva and King James Bibles would utilize more than 80 percent of his exact wording. In fact, much of the vast influence attributed to the Geneva and King James Bibles should be attributed to one man—William Tyndale.

In accomplishing his translation, Tyndale actually created the modern English language still spoken today. Tyndale formed his English from the active, verb-oriented Greek language and the Old (Saxon) English used before the Norman invasion of 1066. The influence of the French language from the Normans formed the Middle English of Wyclif's time. Tyndale remodeled the Middle English and formed the English language that is the most spoken language in the world today. The Geneva Bible, followed by the King James Bible, began the worldwide dominance of English, yet their words were mainly from one man.

Tyndale was also one of the first Englishmen to know Hebrew (this was his eighth language), and certainly the first to ever translate any part of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) into English. Before he was imprisoned and subsequently martyred on October 6, 1536, Tyndale translated the Old Testament from Hebrew through 2 Chronicles as well as the book of Jonah. Like Wyclif's earlier work, Tyndale's English translations were illegal and thus confiscated and burned. His final words before he was strangled and burned were a simple prayer: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." Tyndale's desire was that the Scriptures would be loosed in the language of the common people.

While Tyndale was in prison, his close friend Miles Coverdale published the first complete printed English Bible in Antwerp in the fall of 1535. In 1537, just a few months after Tyndale's martyrdom, Coverdale's second edition became the first English Bible printed on English soil. It was published "with the King's most gracious license." Indeed—an answer to Tyndale's prayer—King Henry VIII's eyes were partly open.

Coverdale's translation was fair at best. Though Coverdale was an excellent Latin and German scholar, he knew little if any Greek and Hebrew. His New Testament translation was principally Tyndale's work, and the Old Testament utilized some of Tyndale's work combined with translations from German and Latin texts. Yet the English world is forever indebted to Miles Coverdale for his brilliance in poetic structure. Much of the beautiful prose throughout the book of Psalms in the Geneva and King James Bibles originated with Coverdale.

Also in 1537 John Rogers, another close friend of Tyndale, was given license by Henry VIII to print another English Bible. An excellent scholar himself, Rogers pioneered the process of adding marginal notes and commentary in English. He

did little new translation work, but rather was a skillful editor. He used Tyndale's 1534 New Testament as well as his Old Testament translation through 2 Chronicles with few changes. For the remainder of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, Rogers used Coverdale's work with some alteration. Not wanting to take credit for Tyndale's work, Rogers published the Bible under a penname, "Thomas Matthew," possibly because it was the upside-down- reverse of Tyndale's initials. In fact, he even printed a large "WT" at the end of the Old Testament in the first edition Matthews Bible of 1537 to give credit to the man whose genius gave us most of our Bible and the basis of our language.

On the accession of the staunchly Catholic Mary I in 1553, England was again under the authority of the Roman Church. Immediately, Rogers was imprisoned, leaving no support for his wife and ten children. Standing at the stake to be burned, he was again admonished to recant. Rogers responded, "That which I have preached I will seal with my blood." His wife was there with their now eleven children—one Rogers had never seen before. Witnesses claim he washed his hands in the fire until they were consumed.

Rogers was the first of almost three hundred martyrs under Queen Mary I, also called "Bloody Mary." Many more were imprisoned, tortured, or otherwise punished. It was Roger's death that caused many reformers to flee England for Geneva setting the stage for the Geneva Bible.

Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's vicegerent for ecclesiastical affairs, and Thomas Cranmer, the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury, wanted an English pulpit Bible in each of the 8,500 parish churches in England. The resulting massive volume would become known as the Great Bible.

Miles Coverdale was enlisted to lead an English team to revise the Matthew's Bible and exclude the marginal notes. Coverdale's team started work in Paris in early 1538. In December 1538, the Inquisition confiscated 2,500 finished copies for burning under the accusation of heresy. The English team fled to London where 3,000 copies were printed by November 1539, and the 2,500 confiscated copies also appeared in England in late 1539. Details are unclear, but it appears that Cromwell may have used the English possession of a French-captured German merchant ship to pry the Bibles from the French. Another 3,000 copies were printed in London by May 1540—completing the 8,500 needed for the parish churches. In less than four years after Tyndale's prayer before his death, an English Bible lay in each parish church in England. In fact, Henry VIII actually authorized the Great Bible. The King James Bible is often erroneously called the "Authorized Version," but it was never authorized. Only the Great Bible was ever authorized by the English Crown.

Cromwell's efforts to disseminate English Scripture were not ignored. Most English bishops were still allied with Rome and were opposed to Cromwell's intentions. Henry VIII, upset over a marriage that Cromwell arranged for him, withdrew his protection. A few weeks after the Great Bibles were delivered to individual parish churches, Cromwell was arrested on false charges of heresy and treason and executed without trial in July 1540.

The second and subsequent editions of the Great Bible are often called Cranmer's Bible because Archbishop Thomas Cranmer contributed a prologue.

Throughout the reigns of Henry VIII and his young son, Edward VI, Cranmer witnessed more than forty editions of the Bible appear in English. Yet on the accession of Mary I in 1553, Cranmer was immediately arrested. Initially charged with treason, he was eventually convicted of the heresies of Protestantism, and like Rogers and others before him, he was burned alive in 1556.

## Born Out of Blood

Mary I, the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, took the throne in England in 1553 and set the stage for the creation of the Geneva Bible. Sixteen years earlier her father, Henry VIII, had released the first Bible in English following his separation from the Catholic Church at Rome. However, once Mary was in power, she immediately began forcing all of England back under the authority of the Roman Church and suppressing the circulation of the Bible in the common (English) tongue. Specifically, Mary I issued proclamations in August 1553 forbidding public reading of the Bible and in June 1555 prohibiting the works of reformers Tyndale, Rogers, Coverdale, Cranmer, and others. In 1558 a proclamation was issued requiring the delivery of the reformers' writings under penalty of death. A vicious persecution was instituted against anyone who supported the reformers' views or attempted to circulate the scripture in English. Overall, nearly three hundred people were burned at the stake under Mary's reign, and many more were imprisoned, tortured, or otherwise punished. Reformer John Rogers, who produced the Matthew's Bible, was the first to be burned. Others who followed the same fate included Bishop Thomas Cranmer, who was involved with the second and subsequent editions of the Great Bible, Nicolas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, and John Hooper, who was often referred to as the "Father of Puritanism."

It is estimated that during Bloody Mary's reign as many as eight hundred reformers fled England to seek shelter on the Continent. Some settled in Strasburg, some in Zurich, and some in Frankfurt. Many settled in Geneva, the "Holy City of the Alps," where Protestantism was supreme. The city was under the control of the famed scholar, John Calvin, with the assistance of Theodore Beza. By 1556 a sizeable English-speaking congregation had formed in Geneva with Scottish reformer John Knox serving as pastor. William Whittingham, a tremendous scholar who according to tradition married a sister of Calvin's wife, succeeded Knox as pastor in 1557.

No new English Bible translations had emerged since the first Great Bible of 1539, and William Whittingham undertook the work of improving the English versions of the New Testament. First published in Geneva by Conrad Badius in 1557, Whittingham produced a revision of William Tyndale's New Testament "with most profitable annotations of all hard places." This small, thick octavo edition included an epistle by Calvin himself, which helped to introduce Protestant views to the English people. In this epistle Calvin declared, "Christ is the End of the Law...."

Whittingham included a preface entitled, "To the Reader Mercy and peace through Christ our Savior." It reads:



In the Church of Christ there are three kinds of men: some are malicious despisers of the Word and graces of God, who turn all things into poison, and a further hardening of their hearts: others do not openly resist and contemn [condemn] the Gospel, because they are struck as it were in a trance with the majesty thereof, yet either they quarrel and cavil, or else deride and mock at whatsoever is done for the advancement of the same. The third sort are simple lambs which partly are already in the fold of Christ, and so willingly hear their Shepherd's voice, and partly wandering astray by ignorance tarry the time till the Shepherd find them and bring them unto His flock. To this kind of people in this translation I chiefly had respect, as moved unto zeal, counseled by the godly, and drawn by occasion, both of the place where God hath appointed us to dwell, and also to the store of heavenly learning and judgment which so abounded in this city of Geneva, that justly it may be called the patron and mirror of true religion and godliness.

## The Translation

Immediately after the release of Whittingham's 1557 New Testament, the English exiles entered upon a revision of the whole Bible. Assisted by Beza and possibly Calvin himself, several English exiles were involved in the translating, but it is impossible to say how many. Miles Coverdale, who produced the Coverdale and Great Bibles, resided in Geneva for a time and may have assisted, and a similar claim may be advanced in favor of John Knox. The famed sixteenth-century English historian, John Foxe, was also in refuge in Switzerland during this time. Yet the chief credit belongs to William Whittingham, who was probably assisted by Thomas Sampson, Anthony Gilby, and possibly William Cole, William Kethe, John Baron, John Pullain, and John Bodley.

The Old Testament from Genesis through 2 Chronicles and the New Testament were merely revisions of Tyndale's previous monumental efforts. The works of Coverdale, Rogers, and Cranmer were also consulted, and the English exiles completed a careful collation of Hebrew and Greek originals. They compared Latin versions, especially Beza's, and the standard French and German versions as well.

While Coverdale's, Matthew's, and the Great Bible were merely revisions of Tyndale's translations from the original Hebrew and Greek, the Geneva Bible charted new ground. The scholarly English refugees in Geneva completed the translation of the remainder of the Old Testament directly from Hebrew into English for the first time. Tyndale had only translated the Hebrew (Masoretic) text up to 2 Chronicles before he was imprisoned in 1535, and it was not until this handful of scholars assembled in refuge in Geneva that there was sufficient familiarity with Hebrew among reformers to complete the translation of the Old Testament directly from Hebrew. Thus, the English scholars who escaped persecution in their native land and resided in Geneva produced the first English Bible ever completely translated from the original languages.

The work took over two years, and in 1560 the world witnessed a new English Bible, which is now known as the "Geneva Bible." In a simple prefatory note, the Geneva Bible was dedicated to "Bloody Mary's" successor, Queen Elizabeth I, the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Bolyen.

## Other Names

The 1560 Geneva Bible was popularly called the "Breeches Bible" because the Geneva translators chose the term "breeches" for the coverings referenced in Genesis 3:7: "Then the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig tree leaves together, and made them selves breeches." Tyndale and Coverdale had previously used "apurns," and the King James translators later followed Tyndale and Coverdale and used "aprons." This name, "Breeches Bible," was born out of the peculiarity of the term "breeches" and the implausibility that their coverings were in fact "breeches." The 1562 Geneva Bible was called the "Place-makers Bible" because of an erroneous rendering of Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the place-makers." Later, the Geneva Bible also became known as the "Pilgrims' Bible" because the Pilgrims brought Geneva Bibles when they sailed to the New World in 1620.

## The First English Bible in America

Technically, the Geneva Bible was not the first Bible in America, and possibly not even the first English Bible in America. Certainly the Huguenots brought French Bibles and possibly German Bibles to Beaufort, South Carolina, when they fled to the New World to escape persecution in 1562 and again in 1564. In 1565 Spain initiated a colony at St. Augustine, Florida, and the Roman Catholic priests would have had Latin Bibles. However, the French and Latin Bibles had little if any impact on what would become the United States of America. German Bibles became quite common in the British colonies, but their influence was greatly overshadowed by the impact of the English Bible in colonial America.

The first English church service held on American soil was probably conducted by a chaplain to Sir Francis Drake when he put ashore briefly in California in 1579, and the Bible used was more likely a Great Bible or Bishops' Bible (first edition 1568) than a Geneva Bible. Yet it is unknown.

Sir Walter Raleigh's ill-fated Roanoke Island colony beginning in 1584 certainly had a Bible. Captain John Smith's book, *The General Historie of Virginia*, published in 1624, states that Roanoke colonist Thomas Hariot, a devout Christian, had a Bible among his possessions. Because of the absence of any Puritan influence, it is assumed that Hariot's as well as other Bibles in the colony were Bishops' Bibles. But the Roanoke colony disappeared mysteriously, and whether they used a Bishops' Bible or Geneva Bible is unknown.

Despite the uncertainty of the Geneva Bible being the first English Bible brought to American soil, it is certain the Geneva Bible became the spiritual

foundation for the future United States of America. Though earlier temporary colonies may have used other Bibles, the Geneva Bible was most likely the Bible of Jamestown, and clearly the Bible of the Pilgrims and the Puritans.

It is likely that the Geneva Bible first came to Jamestown with Captain John Smith and company in 1607, since the first ministers of Virginia were Puritans. In 1609 William Strachey, secretary of the Virginia Company, arrived in Jamestown, and quoted from the Geneva Bible in writing his history of Virginia. Rev. Alexander Whitaker, who came to the colony in 1611, used a Geneva Bible as documented in one of his surviving sermon texts. It is very likely that John Rolfe, a young widower, used a Geneva Bible to teach Matoaka, better known as Pocahontas, about Christianity. She became a Christian, and soon afterwards, on April 5, 1614, they were married.

Also called the "Pilgrims' Bible," the Geneva Bible influenced many of the Pilgrims. In his book *The Genesis of the New England Churches*, Leonard Bacon says that the Pilgrims' Pastor, John Robinson, used the Geneva Bible in Leyden. It therefore implies that it was the Geneva Bible that his congregation carried to the New World. Further, Massachusetts Governor John Bradford's history quotes the Geneva Bible. In fact, the Pilgrim Society Museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts has Geneva Bibles that belonged to Governor Bradford as well as other Pilgrim Fathers.

P. Marion Simms, author of *The Bible in America*, says of the Geneva Bible, "Being a Puritan Bible, the Geneva would be used throughout the early colonies wherever English-speaking Puritans were found. New England used it extensively and the Plymouth colony used it exclusively." Even the famous Puritan preacher John Cotton used a copy of the Geneva Bible. The Geneva Bible helped form the Christian culture in the English-speaking colonies of the New World that would later become America.

## The First Modern Verse Divisions

Before chapters could be divided into verses, the Bible had to be divided into chapters. Early Bibles and gospel books used various divisions in the text for referencing, but there was no standardization until the beginning of the thirteenth century. Modern chapter divisions, which first appeared in the compact, single-volume Parisian Bibles of the thirteenth century, are attributed to Steven Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury and author of the *Magna Carta*.

In the fifteenth century Rabbi Mordecai Nathan divided the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) into separate verses, and his verse divisions of 1448 became the standard verse divisions used throughout the world today. The Reformation began partly born out of Italian Humanism, an interest in the original biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, which led Reformation Bibles, whether English, German, or other languages, to be translated directly from Hebrew and Greek, not Latin. As translators began rendering the Hebrew Bible directly into their own language, eventually Nathan's verse divisions were assimilated into Langton's chapter divisions in the Christian Old Testament. The first English Bible to incorporate Nathan's verse divisions for the Old Testament was the 1560 Geneva Bible.



The New Testament verse divisions used today were developed by Parisian printer, Robert Estienne (*Stephanus* in Latin), though he may have been aided by previous work. Estienne, living in the staunchly Catholic Paris, began to express some of the reformers' views of theology, which put him at odds with some professors at the University of Paris. He was forced to flee Paris in 1551.

Tradition states that Estienne carried a copy of his third edition Greek New Testament of 1550 and divided the New Testament into verses for the first time while escaping from Paris to Lyon. Estienne eventually settled in Geneva, and in 1551 Estienne released his fourth edition Greek New Testament with the first modern verse divisions. The 1557 Geneva New Testament was the first English scripture with modern verse divisions. The 1560 Geneva Bible was the first complete English Bible and the first Bible circulated widely to have verse divisions (a 1553 French Bible was the first Bible to incorporate the Nathan-Estienne verse divisions). It is often hard for the twenty-first-century mindset to perceive that the Geneva Bible was the first English Bible where John 3:16 was actually John chapter 3, verse 16.

In this edition we have chosen not to include any commentary and simply allow the strength of the translation to come through to the reader. Yet because of the near 450 years elapsed since the original Geneva Bible was printed, we have identified antiquated words that are no longer commonly used or have been so altered in meaning as to be unfamiliar today, and we have placed definitions for these words in brackets within the text as well as in a glossary in an appendix. These "bracketed" definitions provide fluid comprehension and expanded vocabulary for the modern reader while preserving the original 1560 Geneva text.

**Also see [The Geneva Bible - An Historical Report](#)**

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**If you're not DEAD, God's not DONE!!!**



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—Pastor Jeff Owens, "[Unloved Preachers](#)"

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